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Local school counselors selected for state advisory council

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Three local school counselors have been selected to serve on this year's School Counselor Advisory Council to provide input to Kentucky's Department of Education.

Courtney Benefield of Glasgow High, Alecia Bush of North Warren Elementary and Chesley Craine of Franklin Elementary — all graduates of Western Kentucky University — were three of the 27 new members announced July 24.

"Members of the School Counselor Advisory Council offer incredibly valuable insight to us at KDE from the field about topics that will lead to the improvement of Kentucky public schools and the opportunity afforded to our students," Commissioner of Education Jason E. Glass said in a release.

Craine graduated in 2014 and began working at Franklin Elementary that same year. She was a special education teacher until 2019 when she received her master's in school counseling and returned as a counselor.

Her primary interest has always been behavioral services that help students manage their mental health and emotions. When a former colleague sent her information regarding SCAC, she saw it as a great way to learn from veteran counselors.

“I really like the aspect of collaborating and learning from others in the field, working with like-minded individuals who are also advocating for services,” Craine said.

Since her students consist of preschool and kindergarten-age children, Craine said a large portion of her job consists of connecting their families with the resources they need within the community, such as pediatricians and community organizations.

“We’re the first experience a lot of these families have had after coming from another state where things are different,” Craine said. “We’re helping them collaborate with our school and our family resources, just making sure they know we take a team approach.”

Benefield, a 2008 graduate, began her career at Barren Middle, where she taught language arts, before moving to Glasgow Middle as a counselor.

She loved middle schoolers but said her goal was always to work at a high school, helping students as they prepare for life beyond public education.

She began in 2021 at Glasgow High, where she had gone herself as a teen. Her predecessor was the same counselor she'd had in high school.

Benefield applied for the SCAC hoping to highlight the unique needs of students in rural areas. She wants to see more opportunities for rural and low-income students, whether they're just broadening their horizons or getting the jump on a career.

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“Sometimes, your big city schools get so much spotlight, you see their issues,” Benefield said. “It’s not that their issues aren’t ours, but we also have our own issues in a rural, small town and in areas with such high poverty.”

Benefield said that while some people picture counselors mulling over forms behind a desk, the reality is that the role is undergoing a constant shift as students grapple with mental health struggles.

“We have such a mental health crisis in our state and our area that I think the focus of school counselors is shifting to a mental health focus,” Benefield said. “It’s starting, hopefully, to get more away from the paperwork and the desk as it gets more hands-on.”

Bush graduated in 2003, beginning her work as a special education teacher at Barren High. She bounced between schools before landing her first counselor position at North Warren last year.

What drove her was the belief that anyone is able to overcome adversity with the right intention and effort. In her eyes, no goal is unattainable for a student.

She applied for SCAC with the goal of learning from others in her field but said Warren County offers unique opportunities that educators across the state can learn from.

She pointed to the diversity of the school district, whether it be economically or culturally. No matter the situation, Bush said, educators must constantly strive to “show grace and compassion.”

“As a natural born citizen who has very traditional values and beliefs, I need to be mindful and sensitive to the cultures of others,” Bush said.

Warren County students have also fallen victim to mental health concerns, which Bush largely attributes to the developmental gap caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

“I think we’re going to feel those effects for a long time,” Bush said. “We were essentially shut down for two and a half years, and when you take that into consideration with students who may already have experience deficits in social and emotional learning, I think it compounds the problems.”

Bush said combatting those deficits will be difficult, but focusing on both emotional and social learning is key to overcoming them. She is hopeful in part due to less stigma around mental health conversations and a greater understanding of the needs of students.

SCAC counselors are appointed to three-year terms. Bush, Benefield and Craine will meet the rest of the council virtually in September for the school year's first meeting.

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